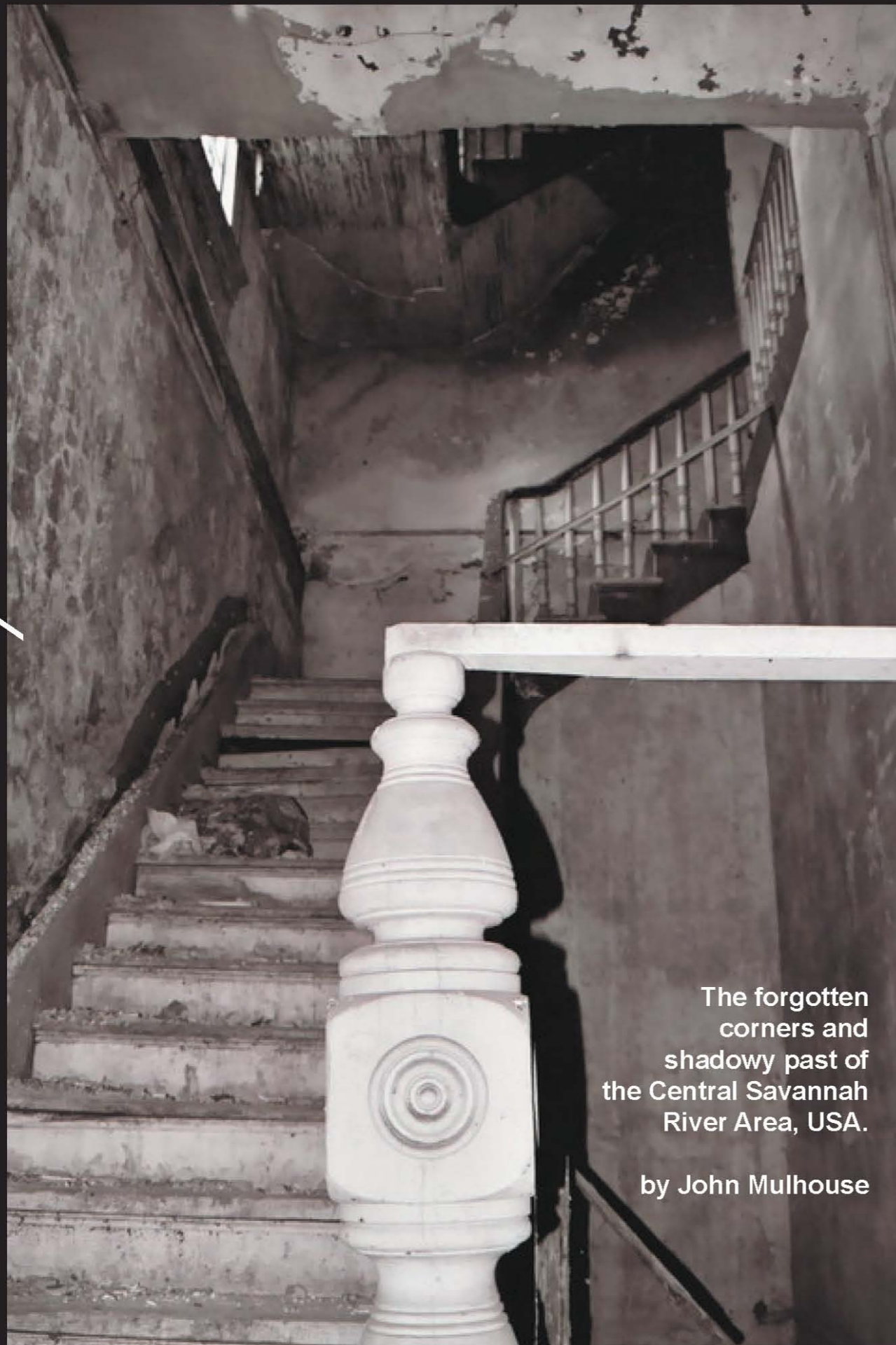


The Soul of the South



The forgotten corners and shadowy past of the Central Savannah River Area, USA.

by John Mulhouse

In downtown Augusta, Georgia (GA), on an empty street corner, there's a pillar with a curse on it. The only remnant of Augusta's lower market, the center of commerce in the early 1800's, a preacher is said to have damned the city, the market, and this last remaining pillar, in particular, when the citizens of Augusta refused to build him a church. Fifty years after the preacher left town, the market was destroyed by a rare cyclone, leaving one pillar standing. In the years since, those touching the pillar are said to have been quickly felled by lightning strikes, heart attacks, and auto accidents. Just across the Savannah River, in Hamburg, South Carolina (SC), now a ghost town, the Hamburg Riot of 1876 left at least seven men dead and stoked the fires of racism across the state. Nearby, in the Horse Creek Valley, the most important textile mills in the South were established and disappeared, a way of life now to be found only in the pages of Erskine Caldwell. Up the road, in Thomson, GA, bluesman Blind Willie McTell learned one of the only trades available to a blind African-American youngster in the early 20th

century, and thus gained immortality. A few miles outside Augusta, in Beech Island, SC, James Brown, perhaps the most influential soul singer of all-time, has long made his home. It was along the stretch of I-20 between Augusta and the SC state line that the Godfather of Soul, high on angel dust, led police on



an interstate chase. Born of cypress swamps, red clay, and brutal heat, the history of the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) is rich, complex, troubling, important, and, in many cases, vanishing.

When I first moved to Georgia from the Upper Midwest in 2001, I knew nothing of its history. I only knew it was a hard place to live, full of fire ants, water

moccasins, waterlogged air, and graduate-level plant biology courses. In an upbeat mood, I sought refuge in long, arduous bike rides to desolate fields and pine stands. In one scrub forest, I came across an old pine-plank farmhouse with a tin roof, porch, loft, and attendant barn. I often went inside to take refuge from the scorching sun for a few minutes during my rides. Then, one day, the house and barn were completely gone, bulldozed for a new housing development. I was saddened by this, and realized I hadn't taken even the smallest souvenir. A little later, I moved to Augusta, and quickly encountered another farmhouse and barn while on a bike ride, this one deep in a swamp. Only, this time, I made sure I got a souvenir. Having never owned a camera in my life, I bought a disposable Fuji and started shooting. Then I had to buy more disposables. Finally, my brother took pity on me and gave me a Minolta as a Christmas present.

Disdaining the ubiquitous Eckerd's and Kroger's, I headed downtown, which is still in the early throes of revitalization after flight from the central city

decimated the financial base a couple decades earlier. I visited old rooming houses, warehouses, and brick factories, and roamed up and down the Augusta Canal. I walked along miles of railroad tracks. Everything seemed to be in a state of collapse, stewed in humidity, cloaked in vegetation, buzzing with insects, and mostly empty of people. But this was where I found the soul of the South. And, for better or worse, I identified with what I saw and photographed; crumbling brick walls, tracks snaking

into nowhere, tar paper shacks filled with debris, empty art deco department stores, and junked pick-up trucks. You could call these photos a study of the beauty of imperfection and the transience of form, or simply pictures of stuff that's falling down and rusted-out. In any case, here was where history lay returning to dust.

Only in the last few months have I really had a chance to sort through my photos, trying to understand what I've taken. At first, I thought the photos would speak for themselves,

but as I found myself continually fascinated by the bizarre and sordid histories of many of the run-down places I'd shot, I searched for more information. Some things I could find no background on, but occasionally a search would open up huge doors. I discovered that what was once the longest passenger railroad in the world ran from Charleston to the long-gone town of Hamburg, and that the engine had exploded on a test run, killing the fireman. I'd explored the area around what had been

Hamburg, finding only a spooky old mission that, rumor has it, was once a honky-tonk. I learned about Civil War battles in the region and who was buried in old Magnolia Cemetery, adding context to photos of these places. In many cases, the pictures were teaching me things I hadn't known when I'd taken them. As I got facts, I paired them up with related shots and posted them on my photoblog, City of Dust.

While photographing these abandoned buildings and vacant streetscapes I used film exclusively. I borrowed a digital camera on a couple of occasions and was unhappy with my photos; I clearly hadn't invested anything in them. Not knowing what I'd just captured seemed to suit my subject matter, as did knowing that every shot was using up precious film (and money). Each frame became important and, as a result, I tried to take as few photos as possible. Sometimes, I'd take a shot too quickly and realize I could've framed it better, but I wouldn't re-shoot. I wanted to capture my first impression, before it crystallized and became static. I think that sometimes taking



photos, or having a perfect document, is mistaken for the experience itself. Countless times I've watched someone rush out to an attraction, take several photos, then run back to the car and drive away. That, to me, is missing the point on a number of levels. At its best, photography doesn't simply record a scene or

event, but interprets and enhances, making the subject more meaningful for the photographer at the instant the shutter fires, and not simply providing a memento for later. With luck, something of that moment of identification is transmitted to others who see the work. Thus, I still shoot sparingly, believing that the emotional





connection between photographer, camera, and subject requires energy that can be easily dissipated. I'm probably just being superstitious.

This is the part where I'm going to tell you not to go into abandoned buildings and take pictures. It's not with a wink and a nudge, either; going into old structures is very dangerous. Floors are unstable, broken glass is often strewn about, and stairways are unreliable. Also, anyone you're likely to meet inside a vacant building is likely someone

you'd be better off not meeting. I recall the first abandoned building I went into as a kid: the old corner bar, which was about to be leveled by a freeway expansion. I was probably eight years old. The compulsion is not healthy and may well be indicative of some sort of clinical psychological condition. Still, there's plenty of opportunity to safely photograph forgotten architecture, decay, and abandonment. You can take pictures from OUTSIDE, you can choose subjects that are

not threatening (e.g. have already toppled in on themselves), or you can focus on things other than buildings. Also, in some cases, you can contact owners. I spoke with a realtor who provided access to a beautiful movie theater that had been empty for 20 years. He let me take photos inside and provided a good deal of historical information as well. I'd be very unhappy thinking that anyone was risking their safety because of my pictures, so, if for no other reason, please stay out as a favor to me.



Today I'm no longer in the CSRA and am looking for a new place to live. Wherever it is that I end up, though, taking photographs

in the South has changed the way I see the world. I still have more photos and history from the CSRA to post on City of Dust, but,

inevitably, the site will begin to change. What it will be like in the future remains to be seen, which is just as it should be.

About the Author

John Mulhouse is a native of Minneapolis and recently received his MS degree from the University of Georgia, where he spent three years crawling through Carolina bay wetlands looking at plants, mostly during a major drought. While he likes to profess a working knowledge of Delta blues, it was really the music of his hometown (Hüsker

Dü, The Replacements, and Soul Asylum) that confirmed his worldview. This has resulted in many problems, yet none of them have involved alcohol. He likes to think he incorporates elements of Ingmar Bergman, James Ellroy, and Wim Wenders into his photography, but that may be a stretch. He's been without a permanent home or job for awhile and has enjoyed it, but figures

it's time to rejoin the rat race. Thus, he's currently available for identification of sedges and/or ditch-digging. John can be found at [City of Dust](#).

